

# Lack of guards, low pay problematic for prisons

## State needs to provide competitive compensation

**C**orrectional officers are leaving Arizona's prison system for better-paying jobs at such an alarming rate that state lawmakers must act immediately on a \$39 million plan

### OUR VIEW

from Gov. Janet Napolitano. This is the only way to protect the safety of those still

working in the prisons and the public at large.

Legislators and state officials have been aware for years that prison gates have become rapidly spinning turnstiles for guards who receive training at state expense, and then leave for similar posts in county jails and federal facilities where the average salaries are up to \$6,300 higher.

As a result, the state's prisons are being protected by shrinking staffs filled with a larger number of inexperienced guards, a key reason why in 2004 two violent inmates at the Lewis prison complex were able to take control of a guard tower and hold two officers hostage for 15 days and raping one of them.

Mandatory overtime to fill missing positions has become so common that the average corrections officer works 55 hours a week, every week. Until last year, those officers often didn't get paid for that overtime unless they left state employment, but instead were forced to "bank" the hours as future days off that they never were allowed to take.

A lawsuit last year forced the state to start paying cash for overtime, which the Legislature did fund. But the extra hours are piling up on the backs of officers who go to work every day to confront some of the nastiest people on the planet. Police officers and firefighters confront dangerous moments in their jobs, but even they don't endure the daily grinding tension of managing crowds of convicted felons.



HEIDI HUBER, TRIBUNE

**MORE STAFF NEEDED:** Arizona Department of Corrections officer Sirlena Swift keeps watch outside tent city as prisoners walk in from the smoking area at Perryville Arizona State Prison in Goodyear in this May 2003 file photo. The state is having trouble hiring and retaining prison guards due to substandard compensation.

**"We are quickly reaching a critical point where a crisis in management must be prevented from becoming a catastrophe."**

DORA SCHIRO  
STATE PRISONS DIRECTOR

Lawmakers made a small effort last year by also approving an pay raise of \$1,000 for corrections officers above what other state employees received. But a comprehensive approach to improving pay and benefits has been largely ignored as Napolitano and key Republican lawmakers have clashed over whether more of Arizona's inmates should be placed in private prisons instead.

The small pay raise has failed miserably, as the total of number of state correction officers dropped from 5,456 in January 2005 to 4,914 by the end of the year, or almost 600 people fewer than authorized by the Legislature.

State prisons director Dora Schiro says she has made a number of administrative changes to slow the loss of employees. She has demanded prison supervisors

improve their scheduling to reduce the amount of required overtime. She has adjusted the requirements for the number of people on different shifts on each site, and her agency has assigned a variety of mundane tasks to lower-paid civilians to focus correction officers on prison security.

But another 600 new jobs are about to become available in new federal and county lockups. And Schiro says she has nothing to convince state officers to pass up those higher-paying positions.

"We are quickly reaching a critical point where a crisis in management must be prevented from becoming a catastrophe," Schiro said.

Additional private prisons could be the long-term answer to the state's growing inmate population. A state-funded analysis of the costs and benefits should be released soon.

For now, lawmakers must accept the free market compels them to offer competitive pay raises to attract new corrections officers and to keep experienced guards. Otherwise, an inmate escape or another prison-hostage standoff could be just around the corner.